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LIBERTY ABOVE EQUALITY

BY JOHN CORBIN

IT is a self-evident truth, or so Thomas Jefferson held, that all men are created equal. With similar solemnity, as one who says an undisputed thing, Jefferson's greatest disciple declared: "Democracy rests upon the equality of the citizen." These be winged phrases; but, as it happens, they fly in directions precisely opposite. Wilson was demanding a rigid exclusion of Chinese and Japanese laborers—in whose increasing presence among us, as he clearly saw, the vigor and virtue of our free institutions would suffer. He was asserting not universal equality, but an irreconcilable difference. By precisely the same logic, we should be justified in discriminating against unassimilable people of any race or color. Which of the phrase-tipped shafts comes nearer the bullseye of our Americanism?

The question is pertinent to the cause of the forgotten folk who are remembering themselves as the middle class—the newly poor brainworker who finds himself taxed and otherwise put upon to provide ever widening opportunities for those who were once called the poor. If the brainworker is to feed his mind with the knowledge of books, his life with human contacts; if he is to have children and hand on the education and the larger tradition which he received—if, in short, he is to fill the position and do the work which is owing to himself and to the nation—it must be by a frank recognition of inequalities and distinctions. He must have a life scaled higher in opportunity, and in expense, than the life of the man whose capacity is for merely manual labor. That can be right only if Thomas Jefferson was wrong—if some men are destined from birth to higher privileges and opportunities. But then this land of liberty is not, and never can be, the land of equality. Somewhere between the two

sayings, which were proffered as equally axiomatic, there is room for a deal of close thinking.

Our revolutionary forefathers had precious little use for the words with which we now concern ourselves, equality and democracy—those of them, at least, who fought for independence instead of writing about it. The word on their lips was liberty. This fact, and the quaint predicament of the Wilson-Jefferson phrase, suggests that equality and liberty are distinct principles—perhaps contradictory.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, deeply as he is despised for the looseness of his thought, had considered this matter more closely than his disciple, Thomas Jefferson. He knew that there is no such thing as absolute equality. In his *Discourse upon Inequality*, which exercised a vast revolutionary force both on the France of 1789 and on the America of 1800, he admitted at the outset what he called the "inequality of nature." Some men are created taller than others, and stronger; intellectually more able, morally more elevated. These inequalities of nature Rousseau sadly dismissed as irremediable. As for social equality, which means, basically, equality in property, he knew that it did not exist in any state—that it could not exist in life as we know it or can conceive it. But he felt that it ought to exist; and to picture it more vividly he assumed a state of primitive nature in which there was as yet no such thing as property—because tools and weapons had not been invented, and because land was so plentiful that no one thought of appropriating any tract as his own. In this state, as Rousseau pictured it, the father had no care for the mother or claim on her, the mother no care for their child.

Such a state is unknown to nature. The fox owns his hole; the trout owns his favorite bend in the brook, and will fight for it. Among the higher animals, of whom man is one, the possession of females is a primordial instinct, as is the love of parents for offspring. Rousseau was aware that his "state of nature" was conjectural, so he passed on to the American Indians, whom he praised as leading the most perfect known life—the nearest approach to the life of social equality. Jefferson knew the noble red man as his master did not; yet he repeated this verdict so explicitly and so often that we are forced to conclude that he believed it. "Those societies (as the Indians) which live without government, enjoy in their general mass an infinitely greater

degree of happiness " than was possible " under the English system of government "; and he called it " a problem not clear to my mind " whether the " unrestraint " of Indian life were not preferable to the restraints imposed by even his own loose construction of the American Constitution. This is the intellectual milieu which gave birth to the most frequently quoted of our political axioms.

At best it is a " glittering generality," as Rufus Choate called it—a verbal tom-tom with the beating of which our leaders inspire us to follow them where they will. It has nothing to do with the concrete realities of any situation in which, as a nation, we have ever found ourselves. The granting of an equal vote to the negroes whom our fathers so nobly fought to free was as misconceived philosophically as it has proved impossible in practice. When the Declaration of Independence passes from Jeffersonian generalities to a plain statement of the cause for which the fathers were in revolt, it becomes manifest that " equality " was to them neither " natural " nor social. They stood for taxation through representatives, for trial by jury—for a merely political equality. In plain terms, " equality " meant that an Englishman in America was as good as an Englishman at home. Democracy most of them scorned; but their freedom, certainly, rested upon the equality of the citizen.

Even political equality is an ideal—a thing to be longed for, striven for, rather than a possible fact. If anyone thinks otherwise, let him look about him. Repeatedly we have seen important legislation, from prohibition to woman's suffrage, carried by organized, wire-pulling minorities without reference to the will of the people. Even in the courts, equal justice is defeated. The murderer who can retain the ablest counsel and a staff of alienists has a decided advantage over the murderer who is poor—and so he gaily spends his life in escaping from sanitarium to sanitarium, in retrial after retrial, to the vast expense and chagrin of the community.

Why do we who profess equality permit such abuses? Because we love another and greater ideal, irreconcilable with the ideal of equality. The desire for personal differences and distinctions, of which property is but one, is intrinsic in the scheme of things. In all life that rises above the brute struggle for food and shelter, the prime motive is to prove oneself unequal and superior—to realize all native qualities and aspirations. Man wants the mate of his choice

against all the world, wants to work for her and to pass the fruit of his toil to their children. He wants to sing his songs, build his railways, lead his fellow men. Unless the way is open to do so he is not a free man. Not equality, but liberty, is the master passion of our race.

Like equality, to be sure, liberty is something less than absolute. The moment a man takes a mate, he is bound to her by one of the strongest ties of which he is capable. Their children subject them both to bonds equally strong. And so it goes, throughout civilized life. The things which freedom gives us with a seeming-generous hand, the things for which alone we hold that freedom is precious, enmesh our insurgent spirits with silken strands. Liberty imposes obligations against which instinct often rebels, but against which the true man is powerless. We live in ceaseless conflict, within ourselves and within the community.

Only a strong man can contain such a conflict, control it. And so, as Montesquieu pointed out, and as Rousseau conceded,—though to do so disillusioned him,—there are peoples for whom self-government is no blessing—inferior peoples. Liberty is a tonic to strong, selfmastering races, and to them alone. To Montesquieu and Rousseau this idea could only be an abstraction. In our American problem of immigration, Woodrow Wilson was face to face with the concrete reality. He cast about it the bright woof of a casual phrase but did not pause to weave it into the close web of thought. To him and to his hearers the phrase was doubtless inspiring merely as an echo of Jefferson.

And always liberty is in conflict with the ideal of equality—which, though we outrage it in every act of life, we feel to be somehow noble and sacred still. In Rousseau's earliest essay, he found in the human desire for distinction—found in the spirit of liberty—only an ignoble vanity, to which he attributed all the corruptions of society; and he never quite lost his infatuation for the equality of red Indians and his wonderful state of nature; but when he came to analyze civilized life in *The Social Compact* he recognized a new set of facts. His reasoning was often loose, but his perceptions were those of a man of genius. Wherever "the forces of life" are unchecked, he says, they tend to destroy equality; but the social pact works powerfully to arrest the tendency, substituting for the inequalities of nature a moral and legal equality. "Unequal in physical

force or in genius," men are only "equal by the conventions of the law." So equality became, to Rousseau as to us, a legal convention. Liberty was something more—an active principle. Yet it had definite limitations. "To obey every appetite is to be a slave to mere impulse," but if one lives under the self-imposed laws of a sovereign people the laws "become instruments of a truer and higher freedom." Equality is of the law but liberty is the distilled essence of civilized living. And so, having begun as an individualist uncompromising and absolute, Rousseau became an uncompromising and absolute champion of the sovereign state, a precursor of the Prussian. "As nature gives to each man absolute power over all his members, so the social compact gives the body politic an absolute power over all its units."

The justification of the state is that it gives the highest liberty which is possible to the civilized individual—scope to talents that, without it, would be thwarted. Equality itself becomes a mere convention of the law in order that each man shall live his life to the utmost—for himself and for the state. In our thoughtless moods we vaunt our liberty; but when the day of trial comes we know that liberty is the most austere of masters, to whom true men give to the utmost in service and sacrifice. No principle in a republic is more basic than this, that the absolute right of an individual to take wealth and power out of the national stock is proportioned to the vigor and ability with which he uses it for the national good.

The *Discourse upon Inequality* was the prime motive force in the upheaval of 1789—in which Jefferson, though American Ambassador, took an active part. But when the Revolution had progressed to the point of organizing a Government of its own it drew its philosophic inspiration from the maturer *Social Compact*, and the result was a State exerting a sovereignty rigid and absolute. Jefferson, meantime, had returned to America. He escaped the Terror, but he missed also the more deeply philosophic influences of his master—both as expounded in *The Social Compact*, which he does not appear to have read, and as exemplified in the constitution of the First Republic. Republican sovereignty as administered by Robespierre no doubt confirmed his belief in "unrestraint" and red Indians. Meantime in America, as it happened, Washington and Hamilton were organizing a Government which, though perhaps unconsciously,

was in general accord with the ideas of *The Social Compact*. To them citizenship implied service; government was a function austere and noble. But to Jefferson their every thought was anathema. They were "tyrants," "monarchists," "monocrats" and what not—Washington and Hamilton. Eventually, thanks to the blunders of the Federalists who succeeded Washington, Jefferson brought off his "Revolution of 1800"—the foundation of the Democratic party—which he never ceased to laud as an event equal in importance to the Revolution of 1776. In so doing, he fixed upon our political thought a wholly doctrinary and largely false conception of republican institutions, exalting above the mature theory of Rousseau, above the organized practice of the founders of our nation, a nebulous dream of equality.

For our present purpose all this is of importance chiefly as applying, not to individuals but to groups—if you will, to classes; for they also in a republic are subject to a conflict between the principles of equality and liberty, subject to the necessity of using the national resources for the general good. The laborer claims a right to hours that enable him to give the needed strength to his work and to have due leisure for self-development; to wages that enable him to maintain his efficiency and to provide normal opportunities for those who depend on him—to rise out of his class, if he is able, to any height. On what principle, if not those we have adduced, can he justify this claim—equality as to the laws of the game with liberty to play it to the utmost? The capitalist claims the right to a life which shall keep him in touch with the world he so largely controls, the right to bend to his purpose as large a portion of the wealth of mankind as he can rightfully amass; and all this we have freely granted him. No claim is made for the brain worker. He is forgotten so fully that if he also asserts his right to survive and to serve, according to his needs and the needs of the state, men rub their eyes.

Today the cause of the middle class has—very suddenly, as it seems—become the cause of the state. The proletarian is rising with an insistent demand that equality be granted him not only in politics but in industry—that all of wealth and all of social amenity—all of civilization, in short—which the race has achieved through the disciplined liberty of the individual be subjected, day by day, to the will of the industrial voter. With class warfare already upon us, the

blindest can see in the middle class a powerful and indispensable ally—with whose aid the ideals and the institutions of the fathers may still be preserved and without whom the liberties of all will crumble.

No precise count or classification of the middle class exists; like so many of the rest of us, the census taker has forgotten them. Yet in a general way we can estimate who and what they are. Very largely they are Americans of the older stock. Edward Alsworth Ross, Professor of Sociology in the University of Wisconsin, estimates that fully one quarter of our population are descended from the Puritans who sought the wilderness between 1618 and 1640—the men who have caused New England to be humorously styled the “brain orchard” of the nation. One sixth of our population at the time of the Revolution were of the scarcely less able Scotch-Irish stock; and, until recent decades, they also have multiplied mightily. It is conservatively estimated that of the Americans of today some 40,000,000, or over 42 per cent. of our white population, are descended on both sides from Colonial ancestors. Some of these no doubt are degenerate; the great majority are still educated, energetic. In the nineteenth century also our immigration was from a stock of prime vitality. Professor Ross estimates that those of German ancestry comprise 25 per cent. of our present population. The immigration of Scandinavians up to 1910 numbered almost two millions, and of Celtic Irish over four millions; with their descendants they doubtless number 8 per cent. of the population. In all 75 per cent. of native Americans come from the Nordic peoples. In addition there were, in 1910 upward of two million recent immigrants born in Europe, including 1,221,000 from England, Scotland and Wales. In purely British stock alone, as W. S. Rossiter has pointed out, we outnumber the British Isles and Canada combined, with some 55,000,000 as against some 50,000,000—the scale being turned against us by 5,000,000 Australian Britons and a smaller number in South Africa.

In all of these national groups in America there are, of course, many who cannot be included in the middle class; but the fact remains that over three-quarters of all Americans are from nations predominantly of the North European stock. They readily fall into the spirit of our life and the abler of them, being equal before the law and individu-

ally free, rise easily into the middle class. As the United States is the richest of modern countries in material resources, so also it is the largest single reservoir of the Nordic stock. And the middle class is its brain power. Is it not an omen, a portent, that more and more the middle class is submerged by the unregenerate hordes of new immigration from the east and south of Europe—that we make it a virtue to teach them the phrases of democracy, equality?

Wherever civilization has reached its pinnacles, it has been under the leadership of this northern man—the Aryan, as he is more familiarly, though less accurately, known—in Assyria, in Persia, in Greece, in Rome, and now again in the nations of the north and west of Europe. And wherever the Aryan civilization has reached its utmost heights it has developed free institutions. Yet freedom has not meant stability: the power of self-control has not endured. In Greece the rise of democracy and in Rome the rise of the Republic was speedily followed by a decline—a tragic and arresting phenomenon. It would be interesting to know why. Historic records are meager, yet two factors may still be distinguished—the wasting of the best blood and its weakening through intercourse with alien peoples.

As to Greece we can be sure only of the former cause—civil war, adventurous mercenary expeditions and the migration of men of intellect to alien Mediterranean ports. Before Hellas could achieve unity, its best were no more. But there must also have been a corruption of those who lived on in Greece. How soon this happened we do not know; yet it is worthy of note that, as early as 450 B. C., Athenians found it necessary to pass a law limiting citizenship to men both of whose parents were citizens. Even in the age of Pericles, it would seem, the danger of an admixture of alien blood was serious. Today among the people who speak the language of Homer there is only a thin trickling of the ancient blood.

The case of Rome is clearer. When the old Romans ceased to labor with their own hands, their place was supplied by slaves—who were furnished in abundance, and from a great variety of races, by ever widening conquest. It was the custom to select the slaves on each estate from different nationalities, so that language would prove a barrier to intrigue and insurrection—and thus the way was paved to an eventual admixture of widely divergent races. Men of

the Latin stock, meantime, extinguished one another in fierce civil war and in wholesale proscriptions. The virtues of family life sank in luxurious idleness and debauchery—the most sordid and hideous race suicide. From the lack of men of the ancient stock, Roman citizenship was thrown open to freed men—an actual if not a doctrinary equality. In the first century of our era, Tacitus noted that the people of Rome were almost entirely of the class of emancipated slaves. Freedom died with the Roman stock, in the birth of the new equality. Roman institutions remained, and enough of the original race to administer them; but among the people as a whole the Aryan spirit was submerged. Only an Empire was possible. Many causes have been alleged for the decline of the Empire, but this is probably the most fundamental. Only of late have students of history taken note of all this and there is doubtless truth in what they say, that the determining factor in history is not war, politics or economics, but race. Or, to paraphrase another publicist, liberty rests upon the superiority of the citizen.

In the modern world once again the Nordic race has developed free institutions. There is no abatement of the war-like spirit, or of the racial devastation which it works. From the ethnological point of view the recent war was a civil conflict, and the slaughter of the best blood was unprecedented, appalling. We of the new world fought as the Nordic has always fought when he felt that his liberty was in danger; but fortunately our losses in battle were relatively few. Yet we suffered a far greater loss through the war, which few have noted—still suffer it, and shall do so for decades to come. It is the loss of children who should be but will not be born. And these are almost wholly children of the middle class.

For a generation before the war, race suicide had been noted—and noted as a middle-class phenomenon. Though analyzed statistics are lacking, it is probable that among highly educated and professional people—the finest flower of the nation—it has progressed farther even than in France. Before the war a Harvard professor calculated that if the university were limited to the sons of graduates it would have to close its doors within a century. During the war the proletariat continued, as always, to swarm; being organized, it was able, on the whole, to maintain the normal proportion of wages to the price of commodities. But those

dependent upon salaries have been forced lower and still lower in the scale of living, both during and since the war. Men and women of today who are hard put to it to feed and clothe themselves and maintain the dignity of their standards do not bring children into the world to increase their hardships—and to suffer from them, as children must, tenfold. Our middle class has little of the ancient lust of conquest and delight in military adventure—though it fights with the best when it must and dies with the age-old heroism. Its ruling passions are those of peace. Thanks to the diffusion of knowledge, and of spiritual comprehension, it stands on a higher plane than has ever before been possible to it, in the history of the world. Yet even in normal times of late, and especially under the impact of war, it has suffered diminution of its best blood as surely as those of the ancient world suffered through orgies of civil strife and debauchery.

The reason for this loss is much more nearly the same in modern and ancient times than appears on the surface. In Greece and Rome, the excesses of warfare and of debauchery were a result of slave labor; for, except the pursuit of philosophy, the youth of the dominant stock had little else to do. Americans of the middle class are more fortunate in having to work for their livelihood; yet an important—perhaps the fundamental—cause of their decline lies in the age-old problem of the manual laborer—with us the problem of a disguised slavery, the “new” immigration.

As early as 1891 General Francis A. Walker noted the sterilizing power of immigration. “Not only did the decline in the native element as a whole take place in singular correspondence with the excess of foreign arrivals, but it occurred chiefly in just those regions to which the newcomers most frequently resorted.” “When the country was flooded with ignorant and unskilled foreigners, Americans instinctively shrank from the contact and the competition thus offered them.” Other causes may be noted. The burden of taxation and of the cost of living fall most heavily upon the middle class. Meantime their standards are advancing. There has been a wide increase of reading, of devotion to music and playgoing, of knowledge of the great world and of interest in society and fashion—in brief, all the phenomena of a rapidly diffusing civilization. In individual instances the resulting limitation of the family is often selfish and wilful; but on the whole, the lifting of

the cultural standards of the middle class is the result of a sound and salutary instinct, calculated to give it precisely the breadth of outlook and tonic mentality which has always been its greatest need. And at the worst this cause is secondary. The primary cause is immigration, the results of which are so immediate and definite that, as General Walker found, they could be checked off "in those States and in the very counties" into which immigration flowed.

All this became evident even under the old immigration from Northern Europe, which reached its crest in 1882 and then steadily subsided. By 1896 a widely different immigration had come to surpass it in numbers, floods of "Mediterranean" and "Alpine" peoples from southern and eastern Europe and Asia Minor, including half a million largely Mongolian in blood—Portuguese, Sicilians, South Italians, Greeks, Slovaks, Lithuanians, Poles, Syrians, Armenians—people that, having been basely subjected throughout history, still live in mediaeval filth and squalor, with little sense of the dignity of life or the nobility of womanhood; people who have no experience of free institutions and probably little or no capacity for them.

Our tolerance of the new immigration has two sets of causes, ironically contrasted. The chief consideration, from our side of the water, has been the profit that is to be made out of laborers who will submit to an un-American standard of living—and of wages. Hand in glove with this is the profit which steamship lines find in a multitude of steerage passengers. These are no mere allegations but facts familiar to all sociologists—who make use of them nowadays mainly as socialistic propaganda. A vigorous contributory cause has been the effort of philanthropic Jews to relieve their nationals from the persecutions of central Europe, and to open up to them the blessing of our land and its institutions—a movement that has been more successful, far, than Zionism. "Not only Jerusalem is the golden." These forces of our own ruthless greed and of an intelligent race philanthropy have found a strong ally in our national sentimentality—which propagandists from the basic industries, from the steamship companies and from the friends of Russian and Polish Jews have not been slow to foster. The "blessing of democratic institutions," they tell us, is a solvent in which all races rise to any desired height. In praise of our "melting pot," Israel Zangwill wrote a whole, long

play, which had a wide appeal to our self approbation. Even the politicians have joined the fulsome eulogy—for many of them find in the increasing hordes of ignorant voters an inexhaustible source of power. One and all point out—and not without truth—that in patience and endurance, as also in thrift, these aliens are our superiors—neglecting to add, of course, that these very qualities, coupled with their lower standard of conduct and thought, will enable them eventually to dispossess us of our birthright. They subtly suggest that, by relieving us of the merely manual task, they leave us free to advance in prosperity and in the enjoyment of it—but do not point out the inevitable end of that enjoyment! They appeal mightily to our “reason” in suggesting that the only quick solution of the servant problem is in rapidly increasing immigration. No doubt the wise ones said the same in Rome! Industrially and politically we are committing the age-old Nordic folly. And we not only give these “wage slaves” full citizenship but proclaim them in all ways our equals—blandly assume that we have “Americanized” them when we have taught them our patter of equality and democracy.

The peoples of the old immigration spoke various languages, had various national characters and traditions; but racially they were for the most part close kindred—to one another and to us. The melting pot has melted nothing—biologists know that it can melt nothing. Widely divergent races may mingle but they do not blend. And the result of their mingling is mongrelization—the progressive debasement of both stocks which has made the “free institutions” of Central and South America a jest. In becoming Americans, immigrants of the northern race have sloughed off their superficial and merely national differences, but in the process they have realized more fully their unity and harmony of race. For the first century of its life our nation, though traveling the dangerous, untrod paths of democracy, has been the world’s paragon of stability—as the nations to the south of us have been a byword of facile revolution. And now we also have started in the way that, in the slow lapse of centuries, can only end in mongrelization.

Meantime there is a near danger, not racial but political—a danger of revolution, which the public has strangely misconceived. Nowhere is the force of racial instinct more clearly evident than in the popular conception that the really

dangerous radicals are foreigners. In point of fact, alien propagandists have been relatively few and, except in the incitement of sporadic violence, impotent. As for the great masses of immigrants, they have been too ignorant, too hard-working, too much bent upon the week's wage, to give thought to revolution. Even in the steel strike, which was essentially a strike of "new" immigrants, the revolutionary element was negligible. The organizing leaders, Fitzpatrick and Foster, were Americans—and revolutionists. So everywhere, the radical element which is dangerous consists of Americans born and bred.

And with the leaders we have furnished the inflammatory idea, without which revolution is impossible—we ourselves, the American people. Professing the Jeffersonian doctrine of universal equality, we have carried it to its political consummation in universal franchise. Whether right or wrong, that step cannot be retraced. If we proceed by the ancient logic, however, one more step is inevitable. Like our political government, our industries, and their invested capital, will be administered democratically. For, though we persistently blink the fact, the basic principle of Socialism is the doctrine of equality. By the logic of our own teaching, industry must be controlled by all workers—including the "wage slaves" of the new immigration.

Now in industrial democracy there are many plausible and perhaps fruitful ideas. Even the American Federation of Labor, once so solidly conservative, has declared in favor of "democratic control" of the railways, and by an overwhelming majority. It is a confident prophet who will say that our great industrial units may not some day have a definite power over government as it affects their special interests. But if this new order is to be ruled by its educated brain force, and not by the voice of the ignorant and racially inferior laborer, it can only be by a candid recognition of the special services and responsibilities of the middle class.

Many questions arise of the when, the how, and the wherewithal—questions which, far from being answered, have not yet been clearly put. But beneath them all lies this necessity: the Jeffersonian bubble of equality must be pricked. Above equality is liberty, and liberty rests upon the superiority of the citizen.

JOHN CORBIN.